

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Victoria, and
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Victoria, and
The Navy and Military Club,
Melbourne, Victoria

Counsel Assisting: LEUT M Vesper RANR

On Wednesday, 25 June 2008
(Day 4)

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THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Richard Radcliffe [REDACTED] in Victoria to take his evidence.

Mr Radcliffe is 88 years of age. Mr Radcliffe, thank you for seeing me today.

<RICHARD VINCENT RADCLIFFE, sworn

THE WITNESS: The only thing is my memory is not one hundred per cent.

THE PRESIDENT: I understand that.

<EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER

LEUT VESPER

Q. Mr Radcliffe, can you tell this Commission of Inquiry your full name?

A. Richard Vincent Radcliffe.

Q. You live at [REDACTED]

A. [REDACTED] and born on [REDACTED]

Q. You have prepared a statutory declaration for the Commission of Inquiry. Is that so?

A. That's correct.

Q. You declared that statutory declaration on 10 June 2008. Is that so?

A. That's correct.

LEUT VESPER: I tender that.

THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 8.

EXHIBIT #8 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF RICHARD VINCENT RADCLIFFE DECLARED 10/06/08

LEUT VESPER: If I can have access to that, Mr President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

LEUT VESPER

Q. Mr Radcliffe, with the President's leave, I'm just going to ask you a few

- 1 more questions. Firstly it's correct, isn't it, that you served in HMAS Sydney
2 from 15 October 1938 until 27 February 1941. Is that so?
3 A. That's correct.
4
5 Q. You served in Sydney as a torpedoman. Is that so?
6 A. That's right, yes.
7
8 Q. For most of your time in Sydney your action stations position was as a
9 member of one of the torpedo teams. Is that so?
10 A. Yes, that's right.
11
12 Q. I just want to ask you some questions about the torpedo mounts on
13 Sydney. When Sydney was piped to action stations either for exercises or as
14 part of an operational need, I take it that the torpedomen would form up at their
15 respective torpedo tubes. Is that what happened?
16 A. That's correct, yes.
17
18 Q. What was done in terms of the torpedo mounts; were they trained
19 outboard or were they kept still fore and aft?
20 A. I assume at the moment that it happened they were only at cruising
21 stations, not action stations, because usually they don't go to action stations
22 when they confront a merchant ship.
23
24 Q. Mr Radcliffe, I'm not asking you about what you think might have
25 happened after you left the ship. I'm just asking you some general questions
26 about what happened when you were in the ship. As I asked, when the ship
27 went to action stations and the torpedomen went to the torpedo mounts --
28 A. They trained them outboard.
29
30 Q. There were pins on the aft end of each torpedo mount. Is that the case,
31 the safety pins?
32 A. There's a - one at 90 degrees holding it outboard. There was one at
33 180 degrees holding it inboard.
34
35 Q. In your statutory declaration at paragraph 11 you talk about the different
36 crew who were managing the torpedo tubes and you mentioned that there was
37 a leading torpedo operator who would be formed up behind the tubes who
38 controlled the releasing of safety pins which were fitted to the end of each tube.
39 You remember that?
40 A. Yes, I remember that.
41
42 Q. The safety pins, were they in each of the four tubes?
43 A. The safety pins were in the back of the compression chamber from the
44 charge and it had to be withdrawn before the pin could go on to the back of the
45 charge to build up the pressure in that pressure tank to get behind the torpedo
46 and expel it out of the tube.
47

1 Q. Mr Radcliffe, I just want you to keep thinking about those safety pins?

2 A. Yes.

3

4 Q. When the torpedomen would form up at action stations, were the pins
5 always automatically removed?

6 A. No, that was the idea of the pins, that when the larger guns were fired
7 the compression fired the pin in the chamber and it nearly set off the torpedoes.
8 We took the shell out and there was a mark on the back of the cap in the fitting
9 where the pin had come through and had touched, so they had to say put the
10 pins in while the charges were up top, but when they fired them and took the
11 torpedoes on to the - out, like that, they were ready to take the pins out when
12 they were told.

13

14 Q. When would the pins be taken out?

15 A. Just before they were about to fire the torpedoes.

16

17 THE PRESIDENT

18

19 Q. The pins were there as a safety device to stop the torpedoes being
20 launched when the main guns were fired?

21 A. That's right.

22

23 Q. If they were going to launch the torpedoes you'd get an order to remove
24 the pins, would you?

25 A. Yes, the canopy in the centre of the torpedo tubes was - an operator in
26 there with his hearing aid so he was in direct contact from the bridge. He'd be
27 told and he'd pass the order on to the people outside. And they would remove
28 the pins when the, but they were all on tenterhooks all the time there in the
29 room, would have taken a second or so to remove the pins.

30

31 Q. Could the torpedo operators see out across the water where their
32 torpedoes were pointing?

33 A. The chap in the turret can. He can see and he works a disk of where the
34 torpedoes are going to go and what's got to be set on the torpedoes and he
35 gets the settings and everything from the bridge. And he sets the depth of
36 travel. It was quite a complicated affair because they could zigzag the
37 torpedoes, you could put them on a fan or put them straight ahead and they set
38 it at one depth and one at another depth. And I don't know at that time what the
39 Sydney's were, if they had the more modern ones, they had also had a
40 magnetic firing system, so that if they went under the vessel and missed the
41 vessel the automatic - magnetic field of the ship, it only needed 2 gauss to
42 make the switch that fired the torpedo underneath the ship. We had the
43 modern ones on the destroyers later, but I don't know. 1941 we came home
44 and I had to let all the high pressure air out of the torpedoes and everything,
45 defuse them and everything else because they were going into dry dock and
46 they didn't have the ammunition in dry dock, so when I left then and the
47 torpedoes that were returned to their ship, I don't know whether they were more

1 modern or still the old type.

2

3 LEUT VESPER

4

5 Q. Mr Radcliffe, when you served in Sydney can you recall whether Sydney
6 ever fired any or all of its torpedoes?

7 A. Yes. We did torpedo practice. Instead of having the 750 pound of TNT
8 sitting on the front of, there was a dummy head was in place and it had - was
9 loaded with a charge of high pressure air and set at depth and it was fired at
10 that depth. And when it ran out of steam it came to the surface as a buoy and
11 the pressure in there blew all of the water out of the dummy head and it floated
12 up and it was there - a hook on the top and the blokes used to row along side
13 and just hook in and tow it back to the ship.

14

15 Q. When an order was received by the torpedomen under the canopy in the
16 middle of the mount to fire the torpedoes, could you just tell the Commissioner,
17 what would happen once you got that order; what was the procedure to fire the
18 torpedoes and how long would it take between receiving the order and firing the
19 torpedoes?

20 A. How long, did you say, if he says, "Remove the pins", that's all he had to
21 say, they're gone.

22

23 Q. Then the fellow under the canopy he would release --

24 A. He knows then that he can fire those torpedoes and he makes sure that
25 those pins are out before he presses the button.

26

27 Q. If the rating who was standing by to remove the pins, if he was wounded
28 or otherwise unavailable could other torpedomen step in to remove the pins?

29 A. I didn't get that.

30

31 Q. You mentioned that there was a leading torpedo operator who would be
32 standing by to remove the pins?

33 A. The leading operator, torpedo operator, is standing on the rear and he's
34 got two ordinary seamen torpedomen on each side of the tubes. They each
35 remove a pin and he removes the two in the middle.

36

37 Q. If one of the hands was wounded or unavailable other people could step
38 in to remove the pins. Is that right?

39 A. If there's?

40

41 THE PRESIDENT

42

43 Q. All the torpedomen who were there were all trained to remove the pins if
44 need be?

45 A. Yes, yes, there wasn't much training. It was only a matter of pulling it
46 out.

47

1 LEUT VESPER

2

3 Q. I might just ask you then some questions about one of the other jobs you
4 had on board the ship when you first joined you were the life buoy sentry. Is
5 that so?

6 A. Life buoy sentry as a job was up on the back of X turret and you were
7 out there in the open air when the guns were blasting and --

8

9 Q. I just want to ask you some other questions about safety and safety
10 training on the ship. Can you remember whether every sailor had a leaving
11 ship station or a muster point for when --

12 A. Yes, everybody had their particular place when the alarm bell went or
13 when action stations sounded they knew exactly where they had to go.

14

15 Q. That was for action stations?

16 A. Yes, and at action stations when they got to their action stations all
17 watertight doors would be closed, everything.

18

19 Q. Was every sailor also given a place to go to if the ship was to be
20 abandoned, that is were you all told that if we ever have to abandon ship you
21 will muster at a Carley float or a life boat; was that something you recall?

22 A. No.

23

24 THE PRESIDENT

25

26 Q. Was there any practise of abandoning ship?

27 A. Yes, there was a lot of practises of abandoning ship. It was one of the
28 biggest things, the practise abandon ship and then they'd send a whaler away,
29 and instead of using the capstans to bring it back up again they would long
30 loads and everything, clear over everybody up down - running up and down and
31 just rattle off using the manpower to pull the boat back up into position.

32

33 Q. When you practised abandon ship, what did all the crew have to do?

34 A. Well, I never ever thought about it. I never - there was no thought of
35 abandoning ship. Get off as quick as possible, I mean, because no matter what
36 I've seen in the Navy the only time they abandon ship is when it was impossible
37 to do anything else. I mean - we were all there to fight to the finish. I've never
38 done an abandon ship with the Navy.

39

40 Q. You've never had a practise abandon ship?

41 A. No practise abandoning the ship, just lowering and --

42

43 Q. Just practising lowering the life rafts, life crafts?

44 A. Life boats, yes.

45

46 LEUT VESPER: Mr Radcliffe, when you would practise abandoning ship --

47

1 THE PRESIDENT: No.

2

3 LEUT VESPER: I must have misunderstood you.

4

5 THE PRESIDENT

6

7 Q. My understanding is they did not practise abandoning ship, but they
8 practised various drills such as lower life rafts. Is that right?

9 A. Everybody when they went to action stations they had their own Mae
10 West. This was possibly the reason why they don't practise, because they've
11 got that to keep them afloat and the only thing we were taught as far as
12 abandon ship is we used to sleep in hammocks. Now, a hammock had to be
13 lashed in a certain way and stowed in bins, so that when the - if the ship did go
14 down they would come out and float and you'd find a hammock and you would
15 be able to keep afloat for about 45 hours. That was one of the original things
16 we learnt when we went into the seamanship training early. Everybody just
17 took it into sort of natural thing that you'd never have to abandon ship.

18

19 LEUT VESPER

20

21 Q. The next topic I was interested in, Mr Radcliffe, was the clothing worn by
22 the torpedomen when you were at cruising stations, or indeed action stations,
23 when you served on the Sydney. Normally what would the sailors be wearing
24 in the torpedo parties when they were at cruising stations and I'm talking about
25 when Sydney was serving in the Mediterranean, for instance?

26 A. In the Mediterranean, there was no cruising stations. You were mostly at
27 action stations because you'd been with the fleet. If you weren't with the fleet
28 you'd be with another two or three ships as far as - we used to escort about
29 three or four destroyers or sometimes it would be three cruisers with - one night
30 we went three cruisers up into the Adriatic Sea and sunk convoys and that
31 there and we just had to - the thing they did they'd train all the cables along the
32 upper deck so that if they had to tow another ship out they could tow fore or
33 they could tow aft then that was standard practice.

34

35 Q. What were the torpedomen wearing normally throughout those days in
36 the Mediterranean, can you recall?

37 A. They would be wearing anti-flash gear to start with, that's the hood and
38 the gloves, probably wearing the Mae West, canvas uniform and boots or
39 shoes.

40

41 Q. Those canvas uniforms that you recall were they white uniforms or blue
42 or --

43 A. Well, it all depends what season in the year it was and what part of the
44 tropics that you're in or which colour they were.

45

46 Q. In summer, what were the fellows wearing in the torpedo parties, can
47 you recall, in the summer months?

- 1 A. Well, mostly the torpedo party would be wearing overalls, blue overalls.
2
- 3 Q. Can you recall whether the other upper deckmen, for example, the
4 people who were manning the 4 inch guns, which would have been above you,
5 can you recall what they were wearing in the summer months when they were
6 on the upper decks. Similar clothing to the torpedomen for instance?
7 A. In the summer months it would be what they call a number 5 canvas,
8 white canvas uniform, top and canvas shirt.
9
- 10 Q. Would they sometimes be wearing --
11 A. No blue and white collar. It would be just a plain white collar.
12
- 13 Q. Do you recall that they might also be wearing blue overalls from time to
14 time?
15 A. From time to time. It all depends, people like the painter and painter's
16 mate they would be wearing overalls, because as you see they paint - too hard
17 to get off your uniform. All the stokers would be wearing overalls and
18 sometimes the stokers that were off-watch were required to carry ammunition,
19 so they'd be wearing overalls while they're carrying ammunition from --
20
- 21 Q. Would that be 4 inch ammunition?
22 A. 4 inch ammunition, yes.
23
- 24 Q. Those stokers would be in blue overalls?
25 A. Yes. The people on the, that were inside the ship at the fire control
26 tables, they would probably be the stores people and people wearing uniforms,
27 cooks --
28
- 29 Q. Stewards?
30 A. And stewards and they would be working - they'd have their - probably
31 their Navy blue --
32
- 33 Q. Uniform?
34 A. --jackets, uniforms.
35
- 36 Q. They were members of the Miscellaneous Branch. Is that right?
37 A. That's right, yeah.
38
- 39 Q. They would have secondary jobs such as you say working in the fire
40 control rooms and other duties in the ship. Is that so?
41 A. Yes, and there's - when the ship went to action stations certain groups
42 that were formed up into fire control repair control units and they could wear
43 overalls because they had all things that they were using - well, the tools to
44 shore up things if anything happened at all like that, you know.
45
- 46 Q. There would be parties of men throughout the ship who were standing by
47 for damage control?

1 A. Yes, that was action station, they had damage control people right
2 throughout the ship.

3

4 Q. Was there wood and other objects and tools available to do shoring up if
5 required at various places around the ship?

6 A. Yes, yes, because in my action station when I was on the telephone
7 exchange I would get a call through the telephone exchange to other groups all
8 the time with what was happening and what they wanted, if they wanted
9 something else it would be passed down like that. The only direct phones to
10 the bridge were from particular places, the guns, the quarterdeck, torpedoes
11 and the fire control and the fire control in the upper tower. The majority of the
12 people that wanted to contact somebody else through the ship would go
13 through the telephone exchange. It was a busy time.

14

15 Q. Just with damage control parties, were there also parties that were
16 standing by to fight fires?

17 A. Yes, they were already controlled - they already had the damage control
18 party - they had their fire extinguishers and everything at that particular spot,
19 but they were placed throughout the ship.

20

21 Q. Can you recall exercising or exercises that involve fire fighting, running
22 out of hoses, connecting of canvas hoses. Is that something that --

23 A. They used to do that at least once a week, hoses would get run out
24 along the upper deck and rerolled and everything like that and that's a --

25

26 THE PRESIDENT

27

28 Q. Did you regularly go to action stations for practice first thing in the
29 morning?

30 A. Yes, yeah.

31

32 Q. Then in the evening?

33 A. In the morning and the evening, yes, that was - doesn't matter whether
34 you'd been - had the middle watch or anything at night time you still had to go to
35 action dawn service, action stations or evening action stations and you were
36 there for - either until it got dark or until it got light. You weren't going to be
37 caught coming light and all of a sudden find somebody that was --

38

39 LEUT VESPER

40

41 Q. Mr Radcliffe, when the ship went to action stations would men also form
42 up at the 4 inch guns and the machine guns as far as you could tell. In other
43 words, if the

44

45

46 ship went to action stations would all guns and torpedoes be manned?

47 A. Yes, yes.

1
2 THE PRESIDENT
3
4 Q. 6 inch guns?
5 A. Every gun and every torpedo would be manned at action stations.
6
7 Q. I see you were mentioned in dispatches --
8 A. Yes.
9
10 Q. -- in 1946. What was that for?
11 A. I don't know.
12
13 Q. General good service, perhaps?
14 A. Undetected crimes.
15
16 LEUT VESPER: That is a good time, Mr President.
17
18 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
19
20 THE PRESIDENT: Is there anything further you want from this witness?
21
22 LEUT VESPER: I have no further questions, Mr President.
23
24 THE PRESIDENT: All right, thank you, Mr Radcliffe, we have your evidence,
25 thank you and it's been very helpful to me and I'd like to thank you for agreeing
26 to see us and for all your assistance to the Commission. Thank you very
27 much?
28
29 THE WITNESS Thank you very much.
30
31 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW
32
33 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
34
35 THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Allen Guthrie in [REDACTED]
36 Victoria to take his evidence.
37
38 He is currently 88 years of age. Thank you very much for agreeing to
39 see us, Mr Guthrie.
40
41 <ALLEN CHARLES GUTHRIE, sworn
42
43 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER
44
45 LEUT VESPER
46
47 Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?

1 A. Allen Charles Guthrie.

2

3 Q. You live at [REDACTED]

4 A. Yes.

5

6 Q. Sir, you have declared a statutory declaration for the purposes of the
7 HMAS Sydney II Commission of Inquiry dated 22 May 2008. Is that so?

8 A. Yes.

9

10 Q. Sir, it follows that the contents of that statutory declaration are true and
11 correct. Is that so?

12 A. Yes.

13

14 THE PRESIDENT: I'll mark that as exhibit 9.

15

16 EXHIBIT #9 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF ALLEN CHARLES GUTHRIE
17 DECLARED 22/05/08

18

19 LEUT VESPER

20

21 Q. With the President's leave, Mr Guthrie, I just want to ask you a few
22 questions arising out of some of the matters in your statutory declaration. You
23 refer to your action stations position being in the B turret cordite handling room.
24 Was that the case for both your time in HMAS Sydney and in HMAS Perth?

25 A. Yes.

26

27 LEUT VESPER: We might just pause for a moment, Mr President, if that's
28 convenient?

29

30 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

31

32 SHORT ADJOURNMENT

33

34 LEUT VESPER

35

36 Q. Mr Guthrie, I was just asking you about your action stations position in
37 the B turret cordite handling room. During your time in Sydney and indeed in
38 Perth --

39 A. No, cordite magazine.

40

41 Q. During your time serving in Sydney and subsequently in Perth did you
42 ever practice operating in that space when the main electricity supply had been
43 cut off?

44 A. It could have happened because the secondary lighting, I can't
45 remember any specific occasion, but we did have secondary lighting in the
46 magazine.

47

1 THE PRESIDENT

2

3 Q. Battery operated?

4 A. Yes, yes, and that was entirely through the ship; a secondary lighting
5 system.

6

7 Q. If the main electricity source failed?

8 A. Yes, there was a secondary lighting system that came on. It wasn't a
9 bright light but you could find your way around compartments.

10

11 LEUT VESPER

12

13 Q. Was that the case in both Sydney and Perth?

14 A. Yes.

15

16 Q. The hoists which would take the cordite and also the shells up to the top
17 of the turrets, when the main power was inactive or unserviceable, could the
18 hoists be used manually?

19 A. I'm not - I can't remember, to be quite truthful because I don't ever had to
20 have a drill to push it up. It was always, you know, electrically done. See, the
21 cordite charge in what they call Clarkson cases which were cardboard, about a
22 quarter of an inch thick, cylinders and the bags were put inside that and when
23 we would open the top of the Clarkson case to take the charge out then we put
24 it in the hoist. It stayed in the Clarkson case until we put it in the hoist. We
25 didn't have it lying around and it went to the cordite handling room and then
26 they put the detonator in it then she went to the gun turret.

27

28 Q. When you went to action stations, would you immediately begin to put
29 the cordite into the hoist?

30 A. No.

31

32 Q. What would make you do that?

33 A. When the turret officer would send down, see, because you could be at
34 action stations and they wouldn't load the guns, you see, but as soon as the
35 turret officer would order, you know, the system, to start bringing up.

36

37 Q. How would you know that the turret officer wanted cordite?

38 A. He would ring up see where - on the phone line - the leading hand or
39 petty officer, whoever was in charge of the magazine, would answer the phone.

40

41 Q. How long would it take, as far as you know, to get the cordite from the
42 cordite handling room up to the top of the turret, the gunhouse?

43 A. Well, I don't really know for sure, because our job, you know, we took it
44 out of the Clarkson case, put it in the hoist, then it went to the handling room
45 and then it went up to - see, you didn't move around a lot, you see, like, I was
46 on that ship two years, the only time I went in the engine room was when a
47 friend, a stoker, took me because you didn't go sticky-beaking around because

1 you were told to get out, you know. The only time I went up in the gun turret
2 was when my one of my friends took me up and showed me how the guns
3 worked.

4

5 THE PRESIDENT

6

7 Q. You stuck to your own jobs?

8 A. Yeah, in your department and you stayed there.

9

10 LEUT VESPER

11

12 Q. The other thing I'm interested in, Mr Guthrie, is the use in a secondary
13 role of all the members of the Miscellaneous Branch?

14 A. Yes.

15

16 Q. Of course, the stewards in the ship in Sydney and indeed in Perth were
17 members of the Miscellaneous Branch; that is correct?

18 A. Yes.

19

20 Q. I think also bandsmen, cooks and supply ratings were also members of
21 the Miscellaneous Branch. Is that so?

22 A. Yeah.

23

24 Q. You would all have secondary jobs, such as your job in the cordite
25 magazine?

26 A. Yeah. The cordite magazine was my first job, action station.

27

28 Q. Were some of the miscellaneous ratings allocated to damage control
29 parties, fire fighting parties, those types of roles?

30 A. Could have been. For instance, the band were in what they call the TS,
31 the transmitting stations that's when the order came from the direct - gun
32 director down to the transmission station and the bandsmen worked out, you
33 know, angle of deflexion and that sort of thing, then they sent the information to
34 the turrets, then - because bells used to ring, ding, ding, you know, B turret was
35 on target, A turret was on target then the gunnery officer would fire.

36

37 Q. I'm interested, though, in damage control and fire fighting?

38 A. We used to have what they call, you know, if we were at secondary
39 degree. We used to have various parties, we were shown how to use fire
40 extinguishers and buckets of sand all over the ship. They used to drum into us,
41 you know, not to put water on electrical fires and things like that.

42

43 Q. That was in the Sydney?

44 A. Yes, and while on the Perth more because war time routine, you see.

45

46 Q. The other job of damage control, shoring up damage compartments et
47 cetera, that was practised or exercised at least in Sydney as far as you can

1 recall?

2 A. Yes, there was - but, of course, that was under the direction of the
3 shipwrights and shipwright officer and he would delegate, you know, they had
4 stores in various compartments, bulkheads, to shore bulkheads up.

5

6 Q. What type of stores do you remember seeing in the ship for that type of
7 work?

8 A. Well, they had wooden beams strapped to the bulkhead, you know, that
9 could have been used to shore bulkheads, because they didn't have metal
10 beams because if you wanted - had a saw there you had to saw them, you see,
11 wood could be sawn.

12

13 Q. There were supplies of wood and tools for that type of work right
14 throughout the ship?

15 A. Right around the ship, yes. And also you'll see the sailor's hammocks, if
16 there was a hole they could plug them in because each mess, the mess we
17 lived in - so, you had your food in the mess where you lived, but you had a
18 hammock bin, that was part of the job if you're looking after - when you lash
19 your hammock up of a morning, it went into the bin on this end like a banana,
20 stacked and you had to get somebody in to help you, you know, push and ram
21 to get the last in, but they were there for damage control, because they could
22 just whip them out and put them in the hole.

23

24 Q. In Sydney your cruising stations position when you were on duty was as
25 a steward in the wardroom. Is that correct?

26 A. Cruising stations?

27

28 Q. Yes, when you were on duty during cruising stations?

29 A. Well, yes, if I was - I spent a reasonable amount of time in the warrant
30 officer's mess on both Sydney and the Perth. Because they were adjacent to
31 each other, you see, like aft there was port side was the wardroom and
32 starboard side was the warrant officer's mess and the captain's and
33 Commander's cabin were on the next level above that and --

34

35 Q. What uniform or clothing would you be normally wearing when you were
36 on duty?

37 A. Collar and tie and suit. See, those days there wasn't any, like, number
38 8's, you know, working dress, just wasn't there, so, when you went to work you
39 wore collar and tie and your suit, instead of having a double breasted suit you
40 had a single breasted one that was --

41

42 Q. I appreciate that you didn't serve in Sydney during war time, you left her
43 in July of 1939, but when you were in Sydney and the ship's company would
44 practice to going to action stations would you change out of that uniform or go --

45 A. No, go in that below(?). The only time you ever wore overalls is if you
46 were doing really dirty jobs, they would issue a pair of overalls, but otherwise
47 the only people that wore overalls were the engine room staff. Officers wore

1 white overalls, engineer officers wore white overalls and the blue overalls were
2 owned by the ship - the torpedomen and engine room.

3

4 Q. When you were called to action stations how would you get from your
5 position aft in the wardroom or the warrant officer's mess?

6 A. Well, Sydney and the Melbourne, the only access like after section from
7 B, X, Y turrets aft were the wardroom and warrant officer's mess, there was
8 only one passageway on the starboard side go forward over the engine room
9 into the over space.

10

11 Q. You would have to travel down that passageway?

12

13

14 A. Yes, you'd have to go there.

15

16 Q. Is it your memory that when everyone was going to action stations there
17 was just dozens of men all --

18 A. It was pretty crowded, you know, because, you see, if the bulkhead door
19 was shut from the flat, like, where the wardroom was at right aft then there was
20 the wardroom pantry, then there was the flat where half-deck - what they call
21 the half-deck flat and there was a hatchway that goes up towards the
22 Commander's cabin and the officer's - senior captains and Commander's cabin
23 then the half-deck sentry, then on the starboard side was that passageway that
24 went forward. That was the only access where forward. Port side was blocked
25 off.

26

27 Q. Did you have a specific place where you would have to go to if the ship
28 ever was to be abandoned? In other words did you practise abandon ship
29 stations?

30 A. Well, collision stations, you know. No, if there was any abandon ship
31 stations I would have gone to the port waist. That was my - that was our -
32 because that was the nearest place to our mess.

33

34 Q. Was that something that you and your fellow mess men were all told that
35 if we have to abandon ship that's where you muster?

36 A. That's where I'd go to because you were allocated a place to go to.

37

38 Q. Was that the case for all of the ship's company?

39 A. Yep.

40

41 THE PRESIDENT

42

43 Q. When you went to action stations did you have with you your life
44 preserver?

45 A. Yes and flash gear, see flash gear - life belts were issued in 1940 to us.
46 They were the blow-up ones or blimps, so you wore them deflated and - but
47 when your flash gear was issued to us well, you put that on your hood and

1 gloves.
2
3 Q. Where was that kept?
4 A. Well, that was kept with your respirator, because you had your old
5 respirator. When you went on leave - leave and draft you wore your respirator,
6 so you wore your respirator, because you had - didn't be wore and your kit bag
7 and your hammock and you had to get them up the ship's gangway, so, I was
8 getting up the gangway of the Sydney and Mort Stobium(?), big AB about
9 6 foot 5, you know, he came - said, come on son, give us your bag and he
10 grabbed me by the shoulder and hoisted me up to the top deck.
11
12 LEUT VESPER: I have no further questions, Mr President.
13
14 THE PRESIDENT: I don't think I do either. Thank you, Mr Guthrie, for being of
15 assistance to this Inquiry.
16
17 THE WITNESS: Thank you for coming here.
18
19 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW
20
21 LUNCHEON ADJOURNMENT
22
23 THE PRESIDENT: I'm taking this evidence in The Navy and Military Club in
24 Melbourne where Mr Gordon White who is 87 years of age has come from his
25 home in Aspendale to give evidence.
26
27 Thank you for coming here, Mr White, to help the Commission.
28
29 <GORDON DEVERAUX WHITE, sworn
30
31 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER
32
33 LEUT VESPER
34
35 Q. Sir, can you tell this Commission your full name?
36 A. Gordon Deveraux White, pronounced Deveraux, I believe.
37
38 Q. Is your address [REDACTED]
39 A. That's right.
40
41 Q. Sir, have you made a statutory declaration for the purposes of the
42 Commission of Inquiry?
43 A. I have.
44
45 Q. I'll show you a document. Is that the statutory declaration you had
46 prepared? You don't need to read it, sir, just identify it, if you can?
47 A. It looks like what I've signed there. Is this a copy?

- 1
- 2 Q. It is a copy. If you could go to the last page and tell me if that's your
3 signature?
- 4 A. Definitely my signature, yes.
- 5
- 6 LEUT VESPER: I tender that.
- 7
- 8 THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I'll mark Mr White's statutory declaration exhibit 10.
- 9
- 10 EXHIBIT #10 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF GORDON DEVERAUX WHITE
- 11
- 12 LEUT VESPER
- 13
- 14 Q. If I could have access to that, sir. With your leave, Mr President, I just
15 want to ask you a few questions, Mr White, about some of the matters you
16 touch upon in your statutory declaration. Firstly, you served in HMAS Sydney
17 from 14 September 1938 until 1 March 1941?
- 18 A. Correct.
- 19
- 20 Q. During your service in Sydney you were mentioned in dispatches. Is that
21 the case?
- 22 A. Correct, yes.
- 23
- 24 Q. That was in relation to your performance of duty in the action against the
25 Italian cruiser Bartolomeo Colleoni?
- 26 A. Correct.
- 27
- 28 Q. One of your principal duties in HMAS Sydney was as part of the
29 personnel in the director control tower. Is that the case?
- 30 A. Yes.
- 31
- 32 Q. As such you became quite knowledgeable about how the director control
33 system worked in HMAS Sydney. Is that so?
- 34 A. Yes.
- 35
- 36 Q. In order to assist the President in understanding how the director control
37 tower personnel would operate and where they sat, you prepared a document
38 which is in fact an annexure to your statement, which is this document. Is that
39 so?
- 40 A. That's right, yes.
- 41
- 42 Q. Just so I understand it, what position did you normally take in the director
43 control tower at action stations in Sydney?
- 44 A. I was a range to elevation unit operator, converting the range into the
45 elevations for the guns.
- 46
- 47 Q. I take it there were many times when Sydney would exercise her main

- 1 armament. Is that so?
- 2 A. Yes, very often we had exercise.
- 3
- 4 Q. Would the ship go to action stations?
- 5 A. We would go to action stations.
- 6
- 7 Q. I'm interested in whether or not Sydney ever exercised her main guns
8 against close targets and in particular targets in the order of 1,000 yards?
- 9 A. I can remember - I can't remember going that - very close to another
10 ship.
- 11
- 12 Q. I understand?
- 13 A. Not under my captain.
- 14
- 15 Q. Firstly I'm just talking about exercising the guns?
- 16 A. Exercising.
- 17
- 18 Q. And whether Sydney ever practised firing at, say, a floating target or
19 other object?
- 20 A. When we met a ship we used to go for exercise we would train the guns
21 and imagine that we're in action, you know, just for exercise.
- 22
- 23 Q. What was the shortest range that you can recall Sydney exercising her
24 main guns at? In other words, when you were exercising the main guns, and
25 you say from time to time you would train the guns on other ships, what was the
26 shortest range that you can recall?
- 27 A. Well, a bit hard to recall that, can't remember being too close to a ship.
28 We stood off quite some distance, you know, from any ship that we happened
29 to rendezvous or sight.
- 30
- 31 Q. When you say your recollection is you would stand off at some distance?
- 32 A. Stand off some distance, yes.
- 33
- 34 Q. Can you give us an idea as to what that distance is?
- 35 A. Just with anything up to say 8 and a half sea miles, say.
- 36
- 37 Q. In your memory what was the standard distance or the normal distance
38 that Sydney would stand off at when she would exercise her main guns?
- 39 A. Mainly about 8 miles, 8 sea miles.
- 40
- 41 Q. Do you ever recall Sydney exercising her main guns at a shorter range?
- 42 A. No, I can't - no, I can't recall that ever happening.
- 43
- 44 Q. As part of a director control team, did you have any understanding of
45 whether or not the 6 inch guns could be depressed from the horizontal, in other
46 words whether they could be fired --
- 47 A. I really couldn't see from - in my position in the director, I couldn't see the

1 guns.

2

3 Q. Could Sydney, as far as you were aware, fire at targets as close as, say,
4 1,000 yards with her main guns?

5 A. I never ever experienced that, no.

6

7 Q. You don't know either way?

8 A. No.

9

10 Q. You also, for some time, served in the shell room for Y turret. Is that the
11 case?

12 A. That's my first action station when I joined the room was in Y shell room.

13

14 Q. For how long did you have that as your action station?

15 A. Not very long, really. I found that I was a bit light to handle a hundred
16 weight shell. I think it might have been one of the reasons, I was only a little
17 fella, really, in those days.

18

19 Q. Would you have been there for a number of weeks or a number of
20 months?

21 A. I suppose a few months, yeah, yes.

22

23 Q. Was that in peace time, can you recall?

24 A. Peace time, yes, not long after I joined the ship in '38.

25

26 Q. During those few months when you would close up in the shell room for
27 Y turret at action stations, can you recall whether you closed up there at action
28 stations for exercises?

29 A. Yeah, we - yes, we closed up there for exercises.

30

31 Q. Did you and your shipmates ever practise using the hoists manually, can
32 you recall, the shell hoists?

33 A. No, I can't remember that because - no, senior hand would have to
34 handle that. I was only just a young sailor, you know, learning the setup, you
35 know.

36

37 THE PRESIDENT

38

39 Q. Did the hoist have handles on it so it could be operated manually?

40 A. Yes, it could be operated manually, yes.

41

42 LEUT VESPER

43

44 Q. With those few short months when you were closing up in Y turret shell
45 room did you get an appreciation of whether or not there was a secondary
46 lighting system, for example, if the main lights were to go out whether backup
47 lighting would come on?

- 1 A. Well, I wouldn't know that because we had the lighting there. I never -
2 we never had, you know, to go back to - if there was no lighting.
3
- 4 Q. Getting back to the time you spend in the director control tower, the case
5 was you served in that position right throughout the Mediterranean campaign.
6 Is that so?
- 7 A. Yeah, exactly.
8
- 9 Q. When you were serving that period can you recall what the ratings were
10 wearing when they were closing up in the director control tower, what clothing
11 they were wearing, what colour clothing it was?
- 12 A. Well, the younger sailors all had overalls on, some of the old chiefs
13 would have their oldest uniform on, you know.
14
- 15 Q. Those overalls, if you can recall, what colour?
- 16 A. Blue overalls, yes.
17
- 18 Q. The other seamen on the upper deck, such as the men managing the
19 4 inch guns and the multiple machine --
- 20 A. They would be in overalls.
21
- 22 Q. Blue overalls?
- 23 A. Guns crew, yes. I've got photos of the guns crews in their overalls
24 standing by their gun.
25
- 26 Q. I might trouble you to get in contact with me after today and I will get
27 copies of those, if you don't mind?
- 28 A. I've also got X turret's crew, a photo of every man in overalls, except the
29 officer-in-charge of turret, who was Commodore Dollard, Allen Dollard, he was
30 a Lieutenant then, he was the man in charge of the turret, he's in his white
31 uniform. I've got the photo to show it.
32
- 33 Q. Would the fellows in the turrets be wearing anti-flash gear?
- 34 A. Yeah, they'd have their anti-flash gear, yeah, handy, you know, but in the
35 actual photo they probably haven't got it on, but they'd have it handy.
36
- 37 Q. In the director control tower you'd have anti-flash on?
- 38 A. Yes, at action stations, yes.
39
- 40 Q. From where you were situated in the director control tower, could you
41 see what was happening on the bridge if you were to look in that direction?
- 42 A. No, I could only hear, not see.
43
- 44 Q. How would you hear, by voice pipe or --
- 45 A. Some of it would be direct through the shutters, you know, when they
46 open the shutters up. You could hear - I couldn't tell you what they said now,
47 I've forgotten.

1

2 Q. Did you have any sense of what the people on the bridge were wearing,
3 firstly, going back a step --

4 A. Mainly the officers would have their white uniforms, Captain Collins had
5 his white uniform on and the sailors they were on - they would have been in
6 overalls, they had to wear overalls.

7

8 Q. The sailors on the bridge, I take it there would be signalmen on the
9 bridge?

10 A. Yeah, there would be a signalman handy, yes, and lookouts, they would
11 be seamen in the lookouts on the wings of the bridge.

12

13 Q. They would be wearing overalls?

14 A. Before you went into action you got the crow's nest lookout, he's the one
15 who can sight first because he's up high and he can sight the target before we
16 young ones down below would see it.

17

18 Q. The signalman and the lookouts on the bridge and on the bridge wings,
19 can you recall what they were wearing? I think you said overalls, were they
20 blue overalls?

21 A. Blue overalls.

22

23 Q. Just finally, the stokers and engineers below decks and the other
24 miscellaneous sailors below deck, did you have an idea of what they would be
25 wearing?

26 A. The ordinary sailors they wore blue overalls. When you got up to, say,
27 engineers, they wore white overalls and I think warrant officers wore a
28 tawny-coloured overall.

29

30 Q. You say in your statutory declaration that you recall Lieutenant
31 Commander Singer, the --

32 A. Gunnery officer.

33

34 Q. -- gunnery officer, and you say that you consider the marksmanship in
35 the Mediterranean was excellent was because the gunnery team worked
36 exceptionally well and were very ably led by Lieutenant Commander Singer,
37 and that's in paragraph 24 of your statutory declaration?

38 A. If you read Captain Collins' book called storm - not his book, it was
39 written by the pay master.

40

41 THE PRESIDENT

42

43 Q. Ross?

44 A. Ross, he quoted that Captain Collins considered his control team was
45 one of the main features of the sinking of the Bartolomeo Colleoni.

46

47 LEUT VESPER

1

2 Q. I take it you worked literally very closely to Lieutenant Commander
3 Singer throughout the Mediterranean campaign?

4 A. Yes, I was. I was his messenger when I was off duty. Away from action
5 stations, normal duties, I was his messenger, except when I was on watch I'd
6 be in the control tower.

7

8 Q. I take it what you've written in paragraph 24 of your statutory declaration
9 is a compliment to Lieutenant Commander Singer. Is that the case?

10 A. Yes.

11

12 Q. Can you just tell the Commission, what leads you to say those things
13 about Lieutenant Commander Singer. What are the facts and circumstances
14 that make you so complimentary of him?

15 A. I would say his efficiency as a gunnery officer. He was very highly
16 trained right from a young age up to when he was a Lieutenant Commander
17 who had the experience to be appointed to a ship like the Sydney.

18

19 Q. You also make some comments about a Lieutenant Commander
20 Montgomery?

21 A. I never had much to do with Montgomery. He was the navigator.
22 Signalmen would have had a lot to do with him because he was
23 officer-in-charge of signalmen.

24

25 Q. There's been another issue that I've been asking some of your
26 ex-shipmates about and that's to do with the position of the Commander when
27 Sydney went to action stations?

28 A. You mean the second-in-command?

29

30 Q. The second-in-command of the ship?

31 A. Yeah.

32

33 Q. Did you have knowledge of where the Commander, that is the second in
34 charge of the ship, where he would go at action stations?

35 A. To my knowledge he was between decks. He'd be there in case of fire,
36 damage control and all that sort of thing, he'd be down - below between decks,
37 that's what I understood the Commander's - his job was.

38

39 Q. What is it that leads you to that conclusion? Is it what you had heard
40 from other sailors or is it because you overheard voice pipes or messages
41 being sent, or is it something that you were taught when you were in training?

42 A. I was sort of taught at, you know, that's second-in-command's job was
43 between decks.

44

45 Q. Did you have any idea of whether the Commander had the responsibility
46 of taking command, should he need to, from that position, or in the event that
47 he had to take command whether he would move to another part of the ship?

1 A. I never recall him having to take command of a ship. It could have
2 happened, perhaps while I was off watch. Not during my watch. I never -
3 having not experienced the second-in-command taking charge.

4

5 Q. There's just a few final topics I want to go to. Firstly, the question of
6 lifesaving boats and Carley floats. Firstly, do you recall whether or not you
7 were given a position for when the ship had to be abandoned, whether you
8 would have to go to a certain place to muster?

9 A. Yes, I had a certain place to muster at number 6 Carley float. That was
10 my abandon ship station. But luckily I never had to go.

11

12 Q. Did the ship's personnel practice mustering at their abandoning ship
13 stations?

14 A. Yes, I can recall having to muster at the abandon ship stations, yes.

15

16 THE PRESIDENT

17

18 Q. When you practised that, did you leave a voice pipe or how was it
19 communicated?

20 A. It might have been voice pipes or over the speakers, yes.

21

22 Q. You were told it was a practice run, not a real one?

23 A. The order was when there was an exercise, "For exercise, for exercise".
24 It always started off, "For exercise". Action stations is a different thing. The
25 hooter went and action stations was announced. Got there as quickly as you
26 possibly could.

27

28 Q. If you were practising abandon ship routine you had to muster --

29 A. Just muster at your station.

30

31 Q. Beside the number 6 Carley float?

32 A. Yes.

33

34 Q. Were a given number of people allocated to a particular Carley float?

35 A. A given number of people, yeah, allocated each Carley float.

36

37 Q. What about the other cutters and life boats?

38 A. Some could get inside the Carley float, others had to hang on to the
39 ropes on the outside.

40

41 Q. But the understanding was that there was an arrangement so that each
42 person would have a place if the ship had to be abandoned?

43 A. Abandon ship station.

44

45 Q. Either inside the Carley float, inside a cutter or life boat or hanging on to
46 the outside of the Carley float?

47 A. Yes, that's right.

1

2 Q. Is that right?

3 A. Yes, exactly.

4

5 Q. What about exercises with the Walrus aircraft, were there many
6 exercises carried out with the Walrus?

7 A. Well, not really - they did fly them off a few times looking at ships and
8 that. They would catapult off.

9

10 Q. Did you have the Walrus on board when you were on the
11 Mediterranean?

12 A. Yes, partly, not all the time, we didn't have it for the Bartolomeo Colleoni
13 action because we were waiting to get another Walrus but that one was shot
14 down over Bardia. During the bombardment of Bardia it was attacked by three
15 fighters, managed - the crew managed escape, they managed to crash land on
16 Egyptian territory and they got out safely without a scratch, the three crew.

17

18 Q. When you had the aircraft on board during the Mediterranean campaign
19 and you were called to action stations was the aircraft flown off or not?

20 A. No. It wasn't flown off, no. No, it wasn't flown off.

21

22 Q. It was normally used just for spotting, was it?

23 A. Just for spotting, yes. I can remember we were with a ship called the
24 HMS Neptune a Leander class cruiser and bombers came over and they
25 dropped a bomb between us and the Neptune and the splinters got into their
26 aircraft and it caught fire and they catapulted the plane off, left it there, burnt it -
27 it burnt in the water and fell down into the sea.

28

29 LEUT VESPER

30

31 Q. Just on the topic of the aircraft, Mr White, when the ship went to action
32 stations, do you know if the aircrew and the fellows operating the catapult would
33 go to the aircraft in the catapult?

34 A. I should imagine they would be around the aircraft, you know, in that
35 area and there would be a couple of stokers there to --

36

37 Q. To operate the catapult?

38 A. To operate the catapult.

39

40 Q. Would the aircraft, as a matter of routine, would it be made ready to fly,
41 when the ship went to action stations?

42 A. Be made ready, yes, all ready to fly off.

43

44 Q. I take it also the catapult would be prepared for launch?

45 A. Yes, it probably would be.

46

47 Q. Just getting back to the topic of Carley floats, you say in paragraph 55 of

- 1 your statutory declaration that there were Carley floats of various sizes?
2 A. Various sizes.
3
4 Q. Do you know how many types there were, how many sizes there were?
5 A. I think there was about two sizes, from memory.
6
7 Q. You mentioned that you recall that there were two Carley floats on the
8 quarterdeck. Is that something you remember?
9 A. Yes, I remember two being on the quarterdeck.
10
11 Q. Can you recall whether or not there was a smaller Carley float stowed
12 within --
13 A. Within one of the others.
14
15 Q. Within one of the others?
16 A. Yeah, I can recall that.
17
18 THE PRESIDENT
19
20 Q. Do you remember how many Carley floats were on board?
21 A. Well, I was number 6, there must have been six. I think that would be
22 about the maximum, six.
23
24 LEUT VESPER: Mr President, at this stage I have no further questions. I don't
25 know whether you think it might be worthwhile adjourning whilst I read this
26 document prepared by Mr White and then we can resume to see if there's any
27 further questions I have or whether you have.
28
29 THE PRESIDENT: Just before we do.
30
31 Q. Could you read paragraph 8 of your statement, Mr White?
32 A. 8.
33
34 Q. Paragraph 8, it's on the second page?
35 A. 8: "I recall that under Captains Waller and Collins".
36
37 Q. You can read it to yourself, if you wish, whatever you prefer.
38 A. Yes, that 's correct.
39
40 Q. I gather from what you've told me a little earlier, that normally the ship
41 would stand off other ships some 8-odd miles?
42 A. Some 8 miles.
43
44 Q. That 5 miles or 2 to 3 miles was rather exceptional, was it?
45 A. Yes, that's right, yes. Yeah, could have been.
46
47 Q. If I can just go back to the Walrus aircraft, you said to me that it was not

- 1 usually flown off when the ship went to action stations?
2 A. It would have been - we had - had that plane during the Colleoni action it
3 could have been very handy.
4
5 Q. You didn't have it at that time?
6 A. We didn't have it at that time.
7
8 Q. It wasn't flown off every time you went to action stations?
9 A. No, not every time, no. Just depends on how close we were to the
10 target. We flew it off at Bardia, of course, lost the Walrus for the bombardment
11 and we were without an aircraft for some time before we got replaced.
12
13 Q. If it wasn't going to be used for spotting purposes was there any other
14 occasion that you can think of when the engines would have been started?
15 A. How do you mean, just on the catapult.
16
17 Q. Yes?
18 A. I suppose they would have revved - started them up, you know, just to
19 make sure.
20
21 Q. Just to make sure everything was working?
22 A. Working and everything.
23
24 Q. Sure, yes?
25 A. -- I think they used to do that --
26
27 Q. So that was a dummy fly-off, in other words?
28 A. A dummy fly-off.
29
30 THE PRESIDENT: Do you wish for a short adjournment?
31
32 LEUT VESPER: Yes, please, Mr President.
33
34 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
35
36 THE PRESIDENT
37
38 Q. Mr White, in paragraph 44 of your statement you deal with the high angle
39 control station?
40 A. Yes, "Above and after the director control tower was the high angle
41 control station". That's the 4 inch guns control.
42
43 Q. I've been told that those 4 inch guns were only used as anti-aircraft
44 guns?
45 A. Anti-aircraft guns.
46
47 Q. They were not used against other ships. Is that right?

1 A. No, that's right. They would have been useful for a close target.
2 Otherwise they were used for anti-aircraft,
3
4
5 mainly.
6
7 Q. Most of the battles that Sydney fought as you've described in earlier
8 paragraphs in your statement were fought in the dimension of 19,000 to
9 22,000 yards, in other words at distance?
10 A. What, the anti-aircraft?
11
12 Q. No, with the 6 inch guns?
13 A. 6 inch guns, yes, 22,000 yards. I believe the maximum range was 14
14 sea miles. The most effective would be 22,000 yards.
15
16 Q. I take it that the machine guns on the ship, were they ever used in your
17 experience or were they used against aircraft?
18 A. I can't remember. They had been used against aircraft but mainly
19 torpedo bombers, because they come in pretty close, drop the torpedoes,
20 they've got to come in fairly close to drop the torpedoes.
21
22 Q. But your recollection --
23 A. That's my only recollection of them being used. They were always
24 standing by, though, in case aircraft did come too close.
25
26 LEUT VESPER
27
28 Q. Just on that, Mr White, when Sydney went to action stations would all
29 guns be manned, including --
30 A. All guns, yes, everything is manned at action stations.
31
32 LEUT VESPER: Yes, thanks, Mr White. Thank you, sir.
33
34 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Mr White for coming down and giving your
35 evidence. It's been of great assistance to the Inquiry.
36
37 THE WITNESS: Anything to do with HMAS Sydney I'm always pleased to
38 discuss it and give you the information as much as possible as I can.
39
40 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW
41
42 THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY WAS ADJOURNED TO THURSDAY,
43 26 JUNE 2008, AT 9.30AM
44
45
46
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